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IMPORTANCE OF GOOD NUTRITION AND NUTRITION EDUCATION
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FITNESS

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The President has issued an urgent directive to strengthen all programs that contribute to the physical fitness of our youth. Good nutrition and desirable eating habits, physical and mental activity, rest and recreation, immunization and good health practices, constitute the major building blocks for total fitness for everyone at every age.

Total fitness results from a balance among these factors, each in its proper context within the environmental and cultural pattern of the individual. Any single factor taken out of this context is likely to become distorted and thus to detract from the true image of total fitness. Every factor in balance, however, results in an attractive, positive image that, like a melody, is greater than the mere sum of the parts or notes of which it is composed. Total fitness comes from knowledge and its intelligent application, from training, and from practice in purposeful living.

"Survival of the fittest" means no more than the survival of those best fitted to cope with their total environment. We are masters of our fate only when we have made ourselves fit to manage and adjust to whatever our environment presents.

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There is concern today over the poor showing that many of our children make in tests of physical fitness. They have been branded as soft and lacking in stamina. Considering the many favorable aspects of our present-day physical environment, such as quality of diet, nutritional status, size, and freedom from debilitating diseases, I suggest that the potential physical fitness of our children and youth has never been as great as it is today.

For those who seek physical fitness, attainments have never been as high. New records of speed, strength, and coordination are no sooner made than they are replaced by still better ones. On every hand there is evidence that when young people want to be participants in an active life, instead of mere spectators, they can succeed and often excel. Never have there been so many careers demanding physical and mental stamina, technical mastery, and creative ability. Young people are choosing these careers and succeeding in them. Does it not follow then that when our young people see fitness related to what they want to do and what they want to be, they are eager for and receptive to the information and training that helps them develop fitness?

Today's school has the responsibility for helping each child learn and develop to the full extent of his inherent capacities. Because nutrition is one of the important factors in total fitness, the school must be concerned with the nutritional health and education of each child.

Nutrition education begins almost as soon as a child is born. All the members of his family influence what he thinks and what he does about food. During the preschool years, most of his nutritional guidance comes from his family. Training him in good food habits is both the right and the obligation of his parents.

When school children ate all their meals at home or from the home food supply, nutrition guidance continued to be primarily the responsibility of the home. Now, however, millions of children eat their midday meal away from home because family and community life has changed in many ways-- schools are consolidated and mothers are employed, just to mention two changes. What was once solely the right and obligation of the home is now a shared responsibility of the home and the school. In this the school should play only a supportive role, however, and the home should retain the primary obligation and right to provide for the welfare of children. When the home tends to shift rather than share responsibility for school feeding, then everyone concerned is the loser.

Just as there can be imbalances in the total fitness program, there can be imbalances within the nutrition component of total fitness. Particularly noticeable today is the imbalance between the amount of information being given out about food and health and the amount of scientific knowledge possessed by the people who are giving out the information! Too often, the less people know the more active and vocal they are as "experts." Any program with as much appeal as the fitness one is a fertile field for faddists and extremists of every kind. By implication the food faddist instills fear of disease if only ordinary foods are used and offers a nutritional Utopia for a price. He takes food apart chemically, packages its components (sometimes from the most unfoodlike sources) and sells them for his profit. Since we know that selling nutrition in this way is one of the earmarks of faddists, we can refuse to buy his wares. More insidious and harder to avoid, however, are the distorted ideas and senseless fetishes about food and its place in our lives that the faddists would have us believe.

Fortunately we have a strong defense in being able to demonstrate through school feeding that one-third or more of a child's requirement for nutritional health can be supplied by food he likes and enjoys. If one-third or more can be supplied in this way, then it follows that three-thirds can be supplied by food that he likes and enjoys without imposing an unnatural regimen of concern and fetish around eating.

For many children there is an imbalance between the number of opportunities they have for making choices and the amount of training and practice they have had in making good choices. Today there exists a tremendous variety of foods of high flavor appeal, an unprecedented high level of purchasing power among children, and a widespread permissiveness that is not always undergirded by training. Thus children have more opportunities than ever before for making poor choices, including choosing too much in relation to their need for normal growth and activity.

In the daily lives of children as well as adults, food is used in so many ways without regard for their need for food. When foods are used so often for chiefly social or psychological satisfactions, the amounts are usually excessive in relation to our ability to use the extra energy supplied without gaining weight.

Many popular foods are high in energy value in relation to their other nutritive values. Some patterns of food selection include an undue proportion of these foods so that a child's energy requirement is met or exceeded without the other nutritional needs being met. Recent studies with laboratory animals show that diets with a high sugar content stimulate the animals to eat more and to deposit more fat than diets in which starch is the chief carbohydrate.

In some of the school feeding programs there is an imbalance between the foods available in unlimited amounts and the need for such foods by growing children. The availability of certain foods in unlimited quantity does not justify their excessive use which can upset the balance of different kinds of foods and nutrients in the Type A pattern, or any similarly well-planned meal.

Consider also the imbalance between the relative simplicity of one meal a day in a school feeding program and the complexity of the school lunch customer. To each noon meal at school (and at home, too) our customer brings (1) all his knowledge to date, whether fact or fancy, about food and people and health; (2) his food likes and dislikes, both real and imagined; (3) his attitudes toward familiar and unfamiliar foods; (4) his regard for his peers and his dependence on their acceptance of what he does; (5) his physical condition and his nutritional needs; and (6) his experience with the hard-sell techniques of mass media. The school lunch is definitely a soft-sell program and yet many of its potential customers may well believe that only things promoted by the sight and sound of the hard-sell technique are important or worthy of their attention!

Fortunately, many of the attributes of this school lunch customer are plus values with great potential for good. We have a wealth of experience and information on how to capitalize on them to promote his education. Because the school lunch is an integral part of this education, it cannot be dealt with casually or left to chance.

What then is appropriate for the schools to teach and exemplify about food and its relation to fitness? Not only appropriate but a responsibility for the schools to teach? Most of us have had enough experience in teaching to recognize the fallacy in believing that knowledge of itself will not motivate the student (or the teacher!) to apply it, even if doing so would benefit him.

I suggest, therefore, that certain basic principles should be evident in the attitudes and actions of every person who has direct or indirect responsibility for the children in our schools. These include:

- 1) All food is good, therefore it is easy and logical and interesting to eat a variety of foods.
- 2) Good food will help you in what you want to do and what you want to be.
- 3) Good food contributes to good living, as evidenced by physical, mental and social well-being.

Building on these basic principles there are many useful facts to be taught, both formally and informally. The motivation to apply the facts will come from the demonstration of the attitudes and actions just enumerated. Such facts include:

- 1) Only food can provide enough of all the materials children need for growth--for building muscle, bone, blood, and other vital organs and tissues. Only food can give children the energy for this growth and for their daily activities.
- 2) A combination of different kinds of foods are needed to supply all the nutritional needs of the body.
- 3) The right kinds and amounts of foods are needed every day for fitness.
- 4) A simple food guide is a most helpful tool in wise food selection. The USDA guide "Food for Fitness" was designed for this purpose and is widely used. There are other guides also and most of them are based on "Food for Fitness."

- 5) Knowledge of what the body needs and of what nutrients foods contain leads to freedom in food selection. This point is particularly pertinent for teenagers.
- 6) A person can be well-nourished and still not be totally fit, but he can never be totally fit without being well-nourished.

In every nutrition education program we must recognize that we are working first, last and always with people, in this case with children. Emphasis must always be on them, not on the "program." We must recognize that at every age a child knows something about foods--especially the foods he enjoys, the foods he will eat, and the foods he will not eat. Any teaching, to be effective, must start with what he already knows and with habits he has already formed. Above all, we must recognize that there is a great deal of good in what he is now thinking and doing about the food. Concern for teaching facts must never make us insensitive or unappreciative of the good aspects in any set of food habits and attitudes.

Frequent and extensive studies have been made of the diets of children. The results invariably show that many children are eating the kinds and amounts of food which supply an adequate and often an optimum intake of nutrients.

When inadequate intakes occur among the children, calcium and vitamin C followed by vitamin A in that order, are the nutrients in shortest supply (that is, of those we know the most about). As one would expect these are similar to the inadequacies found in the diets of adults. When translated into foods the shortages emphasize the need for increased consumption of milk and cheese and fruits and vegetables, especially those which are good sources of vitamin C and vitamin A. Increasing the use of these foods by both children and adults who are not now consuming enough, offers a continued challenge to our nutrition education programs.

Dietary studies also show that below the teen years the children's food intakes are more likely to meet the NRC recommended allowances than during the teen years, and that at every age boys are likely to eat better than girls in relation to meeting their nutritive needs. Causing greatest concern are the nutritional inadequacies in the diets of many teen-age girls. Often these girls actually decrease their intake of essential nutrients as they approach the teen years when nutrient requirements are markedly increased by growth and maturation rates.

Teenagers are striving for independence and any approach we make to nutrition education that appears to be restrictive they view as a threat to their independence. We must take this into account if we want any nutrition teaching or activity to be successful. For example, in working with a group that has poor food habits, we must start with things about their diet that are already good and then go on to show them how many choices they can make to build this into an optimum diet. Emphasizing that their favorite foods should be restricted or abandoned is sure to build resistance to change.

Young people should have the right to get the required nutrients from a wide variety of foods. The assortment of food or the times and places when it is eaten may differ from some of the time-honored, rigid patterns adults try to impose on children. Good nutrition education at every age focuses on food selection and foods as a source of nutrients. In feeding ourselves we know the best and most enjoyable "package deal" for supplying the nutrients we need is Nature's own food packages--grains, milk, meats, eggs, fruits and vegetables, etc. Physiologically, however, our requirements are for nutrients and not for specific foods, even though specific foods in some form often have to be relied upon to supply enough of the

nutrients. Unusual food combinations need not be discouraged, therefore, as long as they supply the nutrients in adequate amounts. In many instances, teenagers make "queer" choices just as a way to assert their independence. If we adults do not appear horrified, or do not protest, they often quietly revert to established family eating patterns.

As adults, we may feel that candy bars, potato chips, french-fries, and the like should be taboo and that snacks should be confined to foods such as fruit, milk, bread-and-spread, etc. Because our own energy needs are, generally speaking, much lower than those of teenagers, particularly the boys, we know we may have to choose snacks that will contribute to our needs for nutrients as well as for calories. This holds true for young children also. Active teenagers, however, may choose foods that meet all of their nutrient needs and still have need for more calories. If they choose to get some of these calories from sweets, for example, there is nothing nutritionally wrong with their choices. They should understand, however, that snacks cannot be considered outside the frame of their total daily food intake. Thus, what they can choose for snacks depends on what they will eat at other times during the day. Some days it may be permissible for them to choose candy bars for a snack while on other days fruit or milk in some form or a sandwich may be a better choice.

Our responsibility and our challenge simply adds up to a positive approach to nutrition education--all food is good, food is related to what we want to do and what we want to be, food should be enjoyed, and using a simple food guide can give us a great deal of choice in selecting the foods

we eat. Improving one habit or one attitude and giving credit for the positive values in the attitudes and actions that already exist are within the capabilities of everyone here. Think how enjoyable you can make eating for the children and what motivation this will provide for continuing education in nutrition. The obligation of nutrition education goes far beyond correcting undesirable eating patterns. Perpetuating and strengthening good eating patterns wherever they exist is the greatest commitment of nutrition education.

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